



To: National Referees
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Subject: **Striking**

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As a result of several recent incidents, as well as a general rise in actions which demonstrate disrespect by players toward each other in MLS matches, referees need to review the following guidelines regarding "strikes or attempts to strike" as a foul and/or misconduct, the appropriate action to take in each case, and the reasons why such behavior must be dealt with firmly.

Striking is not defined in the Laws of the Game. Referees must therefore apply commonly accepted usage and common sense in identifying the actions which would properly be called striking. As a foul, striking consists of a player making (or attempting to make):

- direct contact with an opponent;
- on the field during play;
- using a hand, elbow, arm, head, or knee;
- or by throwing any object at an opponent (including the ball).

Underlying the concept is the notion that the action involves at least some degree of force -- merely touching an opponent would clearly not be seen as a striking foul. There should be no hesitation in whistling the offense and indicating the correct restart (direct free kick or penalty kick) -- according to the IFAB, advantage is not applied to such behavior unless there is a clear, immediate possibility of a goal.

If the referee's decision is that a striking foul has occurred, the assumption should be that a red card should be shown and the player should be sent off (violent conduct). A red card must be given when the striking is performed:

- using the backhand, open-handed slap, fist, or poking fingers; or
- in a manner intended to increase pain, injury, or humiliation.

Particular attention must be paid to striking the head, face, or other vulnerable parts of the body (e.g., the eyes). Grabbing the hair of the opponent could be considered striking or holding but, in either case, would be evaluated using the above criteria. If the contact does not involve force and would thus not be considered a foul, the referee must still consider the likelihood of misconduct punishable by a red card if it is performed in an insulting, offensive, or derisory manner designed to provoke, intimidate, or humiliate the opponent (the card would not be reported as violent conduct but as insulting or offensive language, which includes gestures).

In the attached clip from a match involving Los Angeles Galaxy at DC United (June 29, 2008), United player Gallardo contacts the face of Galaxy player Donovan with a backhanded slap in the 42nd minute. Although not delivered with the aggressive force of a punch nor with the sort of "cocked and thrown" aspect of an elbow, it is nevertheless a clear case of striking (the foul) which must also be considered a send-off offense as the contact was to the face, delivered with enough force to produce bleeding, and done to intimidate. The fact that it was in retaliation for an immediately prior offense (tactical holding) neither excuses the foul nor mitigates the misconduct. It demonstrates the importance of the referee stepping in quickly in the absence of a clear advantage to prevent further problems.